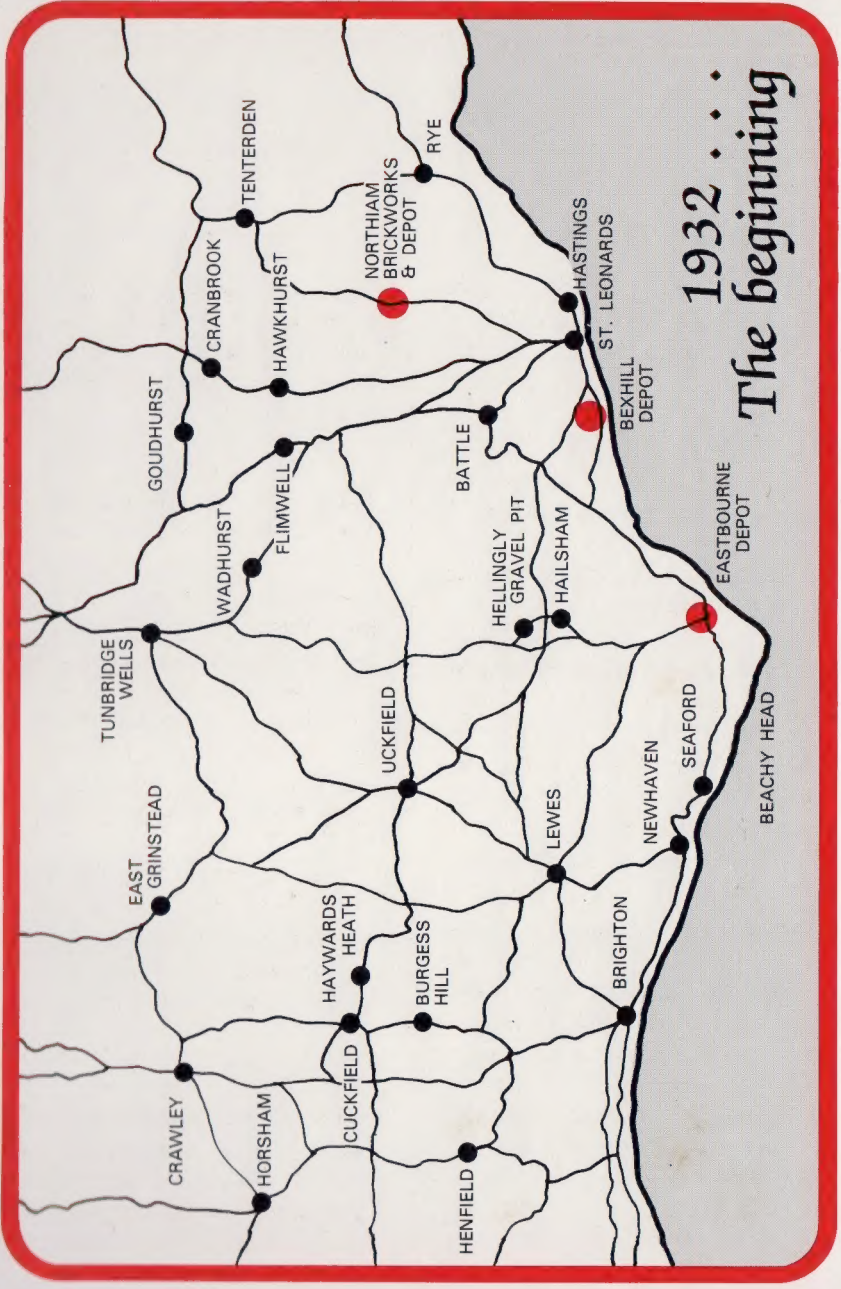


The
History & Heritage
of
M. P. Harris
& Co. Ltd.
1932-1982





How the builders merchants evolved

(as seen from a corner of the south east, Sussex, Kent and Surrey)

All industries have origins and are subject to changes brought about for various reasons as time goes by. The builders merchant is no exception, although his is a relatively new industry in the form of specialising in the 'heavy' and 'light' sides of the trade, carrying extensive local stocks and providing a quick delivery service usually to the point where the materials are to be used.

Many heavy side merchants stemmed from brickmakers, lime burners and coal merchants. The light side merchants roots are mainly in the old fashioned but comprehensive ironmonger, adapting all the time to changes.

The origins of the industry go back many years when almost all construction relied on local resources for materials, stone, clay bricks and tiles, lime, sand, timber and many old buildings clearly show this. But the development later of the builders merchants industry, especially on the heavy side, owes much to the rapid changes, particu-

larly in transport which occurred after the first world war and which had considerable impact on the building and construction industry as a whole.

Prior to that time the established builder was largely self sufficient. The medium size firms had their own stores and workshops and serviced their jobs from this base. Materials they required were bought from producers and through factors and agents acting for them. The materials were transported by rail over what was then a nationwide network and the destination was rarely far from the nearest station.

There were merchants in London and other large cities who themselves usually had manufacturing interests also, such as cement, lime, brickmaking and sanitary pottery.

Or it may have been that some of these manufacturers with stockyards in large towns also put in stocks of other materials and thus became heavy side builders merchants.

In the provinces, the coal merchant, invariably with his coal stocks in a railway goods yard with siding facilities, put in stocks of slates and other materials which arrived by rail and he thus became a builders' merchant on a limited scale. It was not unusual to see such business described as 'coal, lime and slate merchants', or similar.

The medium size builder, in addition to his stores, usually had a carpenter's shop where timber was prepared and joinery required for his jobs made up. The small town/country builder was sometimes the local undertaker and it is unnecessary to say where the coffins were made! All such builders had their own paint shop where paints required were mixed from a white lead base to colour required. All available wall spaces and doors were covered many coats thick with colour testing patches. Some establishments would have their own blacksmith's forge.

Between the two world wars, the depression of the 1930's, taxation and other economic reasons, coupled

with the increasing service a merchant could provide, caused builders to cease buying in bulk to their own stores. New building businesses starting up avoided providing storage and carrying stocks and all the overheads that would entail.

In this period the economics of heavy merchants required them to be sited on railway property with rail siding facility, or on other land with private rail sidings, as about 90% of materials arrived by rail.

This was still the case when M. P. Harris & Co. Ltd. commenced business. Materials received by rail included cement, all plasters, plasterboard, terra cotta ware, fletton and other special bricks, tiles, slates, clayware, drain goods and many others.

But road transport, from small beginnings, was slowly yet surely coming into its own and changes were about to be made. Some of these changes are mirrored in this commemorative book on a company which itself has been a big part of the merchant evolution process.



The History & Heritage of M. P. Harris & Co. Ltd. 1932-1982

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*Acknowledgments to Benn Publications Ltd., Tonbridge for
affording us access to the archives of
Builders Merchants Journal*

The History & Heritage of M. P. Harris & Co. Ltd. 1932-1982

Foreword

The circumstances in which a new business is started are many and varied. Companies can come about almost by chance. Others are formed after long and careful, economic and strategic planning. The origins of M. P. Harris & Co. Ltd., lie between these two extremes. Such a beginning, however, does not diminish its importance. For laid at the start were the foundations of a company which, in 1982, proudly celebrates its golden jubilee. In terms of builders' merchanting, 50 years' trading is not a long period; some merchants can trace their beginnings back to the 18th century, perhaps even further.

But for M. P. Harris, the past 50 years have meant true grit, progress, prosperity, survival, strength and that special reward which comes from knowing we have always put the customer first and given the best possible service. Given all this, it matters not whether the company has traded for 50, 100 or 200 years. What is important is that the firm gives of its best. In this we believe we have succeeded — and will go on to further success in the future.

Our principal concern must be with the present and future. And our main objective must be to ensure that we provide a customer service which is the best in technical information, availability and delivery of an increasing range of materials and, above all, keenness to serve. We must truly be 'first for building materials'. If we can achieve and maintain this we shall be of more than passing interest to our customers and our future success will be assured.

B. K. Cheele

Chapter One

The Pioneering Years: 1932-1938

The year was 1932—a time of change in the building industry when, as microchip technology does today, automation threatened the jobs of workers and dictated the passing into history of certain skills and crafts. No exception was the brickmaking industry, where observers witnessed with alarm the encroachment of the machine, reducing the number of bricks produced by ‘old fashioned’, traditional methods. With the exception of manufacturers who catered especially for architects, the position was causing increasing difficulties for the many small works which peppered the countryside.

But in spite of, perhaps because of, these Chaplinesque modern times there was optimism. For example, the organisers of the building industry-orientated British Industries Fair saw fit to stage the show in Castle Bromwich in the Midlands and at Olympia and White City, London.

At the same time in 1932 businessmen were appraising the British building industry as a possible prospect for investment and prosperity. However, it was only the determined or the foolish who elected to try to make capital out of an industry where trading conditions were bordering on the abysmal, since it was the worst period of the 1930's depression.

Coming into the category of determined was a certain Maurice Paul Harris, founder of our company and something of a visionary. For even though the number of brickworks in Britain was diminishing, it was partly in bricks that M. P. Harris saw a future. The vehicle for this was The Lunsford Co. Ltd., a brickworks in Turkey Road, Bexhill, which in 1932, was developing a side line in heavyside builders merchanting.

It was to M. P. Harris that fell the responsibility for making the builders merchants side of Lunsford a viable undertaking. That he was the right man for the job was evidenced by his considerable heavyside experience gained as a director of his family business, Broad & Co. Ltd., builders merchants, Paddington. But frustratingly, and though the Lunsford merchanting section had been operational for some two years, M. P. Harris found real progress constrained not only by the depression but also by the incompatibility of manufacturing and merchanting. Such frustration was exacerbated by the fact that in any case, the brickmaking interests of Lunsford greatly overshadowed those of the merchanting division. All this added up to a brake on the progress which M. P. Harris had envisaged.

Fortunately, from such frustrations are born futures, and so it was not by chance nor by long and careful economic and strategic planning that the company of M. P. Harris was founded. That the depression in Britain continued mattered not. What did matter was that M. P. Harris's own depression dissipated as the way to real progress became clear.

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It was still 1932. Indeed it was only just 1932, and builders' merchanting major events such as the Building Industry Distributors conference at the then splendid venue of the Metropole Hotel, Folkestone were still to be chronicled.

It was in New Year early days, too, when it was agreed that M. P. Harris should acquire the ailing merchant division of Lunsford from the tripartite Mansfield (Holdings) group, comprised of Lunsford, Broad & Co. Ltd., and H. R. Mansfield, itself a sanitary pottery and pipe manufacturer of Burton-on-Trent.

Financial assistance, it was agreed, should be provided by the group to establish a builders merchants business that would enjoy a separate identity and freedom from all ties with the Mansfield Group. The start-up loan was £7,000, with interest at 5% (compare these terms with those of today!). Such a sum, it was calculated, would cover buying Lunsford's merchants' stocks at valuation with sufficient funds left over to set up the new company, establish a working capital and even finance customer credit.

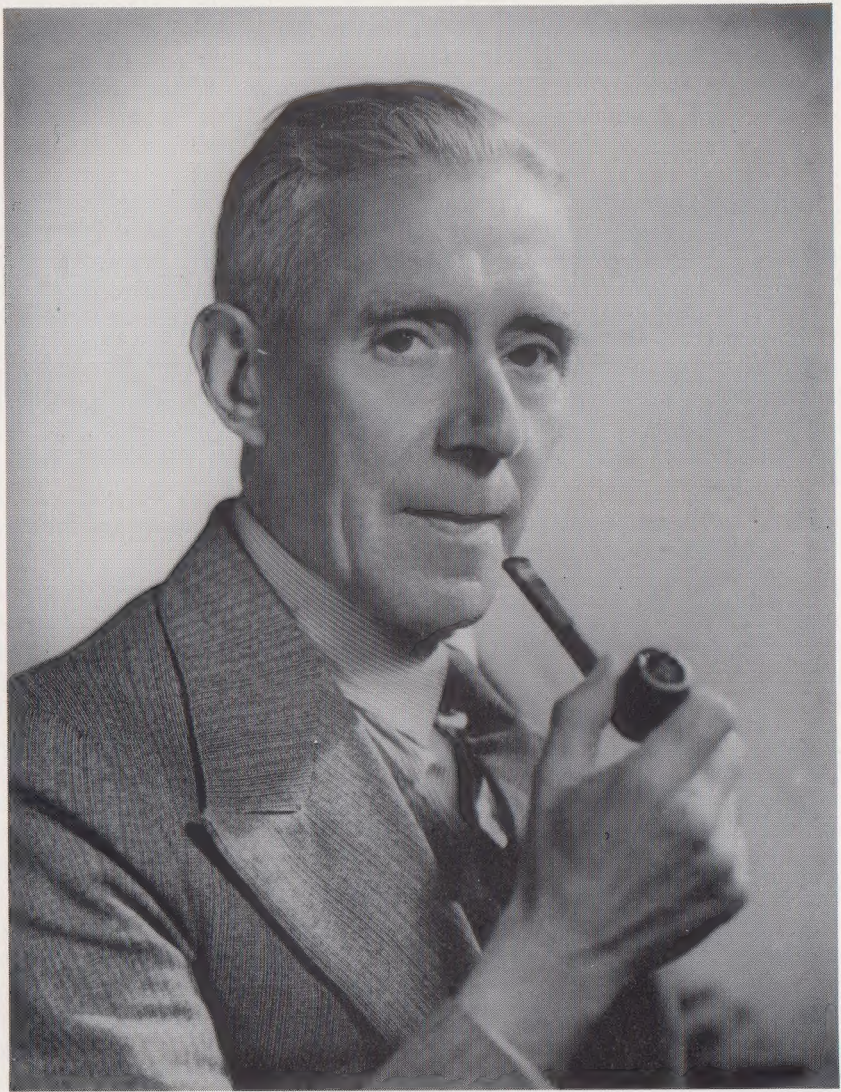
It is recorded that the very first meeting of M. P. Harris & Co. Ltd., took place on February 12, 1932. Mr. M. P. Harris, now virtually free of the previous commercial bondage and determined to succeed, was appointed a director together with Mr. J. H. Pescod, a retired army man.

And it was to M. P. Harris that a certain young man in the person of Brian Cheele presented himself, with the bright eyed hope of carving out a career in the newly formed Bexhill company. But it was with a gentlemanly refusal that M. P. Harris figuratively turned Mr. Cheele around and sent him back to from whence he came!

However, it seems that something of the young man's keenness and determination had percolated into the mind of M. P. Harris, for it was only a matter of days before B. K. Cheele was called back, interviewed, and offered the job of representative at Eastbourne—a branch which together with that at Northiam, had formed part of the Lunsford package deal.

The commercial carrot proffered by M. P. Harris to B. K. Cheele was that if at the end of 1932 the Eastbourne branch had made a profit, the young man's future was assured. If not, solemnly declared our founder, the branch would unceremoniously be closed and Cheele would be out of a job.

His salary was agreed at £3 per week plus £1 per week travelling expenses, with B. K. Cheele being required to find his own means of transport. The starting date was March 14. In the event, as is evidenced by the presence of



Maurice Paul Harris, whose vision — that of a successful builders merchandising operation — came true.

our chairman in jubilee year, the Eastbourne branch made that profit, not to the displeasure of the directors. Their commencing salaries had been fixed at £10.10s. (£10.50) including expenses for M. P. Harris and £7 per week excluding expenses for J. H. Pescod, who was manager of the Bexhill depot.



The saying 'Two's company, three's a crowd', was not true in those M. P. Harris & Co's beginnings. For the company was, indeed, comprised of three units. First there was a new depot on land rented from the railway company in the West Station goods yard Bexhill, and to which the merchanting activity had been moved from Lunsford. A bonus of this location was a railway siding, facilitating the transportation of heavyside materials to goods inward. On the sidings site, a timber constructed building was erected for the storage of cement, lime, plasters, and other heavyside material, while similarly-built office premises offered a total area of just 312 feet²—and this divided into three separate rooms.

All accounting for the new company was carried out from this head office building, which also served as the Bexhill depot office, with one of the two clerks doubling up as depot clerk.

The second unit was the ex-Lunsford Eastbourne depot, situated in part of a timber yard off Whitley Road. The land, which was leased, included part of the timber merchants building for storage, but this was considered inadequate—even in those early-day beginnings. The office here was of brick and tile and had been built by Lunsford to provide two rooms with a total floor area of 153 feet². Staff was just two—a representative and a yardman.

However, exactly who was who was not always easy to decide. When the representative was out seeking business, the yardman was obliged not only to load and unload, but also to serve Harris customers, take telephone orders and messages, write tickets. All of these tasks, it is recorded, our 1930's yardman undertook with panache and humour.

Unit number three was some short distance eastward at Northiam, fringing picturesque Rye. Northiam was different however in that it epitomised the typical brickfields of the time, producing hand-made clamp burnt stock bricks of a pleasing multi-colour and texture. And while the work undertaken was seasonal it embraced the whole year. Clay digging and weathering took place during the winter and when frosts were finished in the spring the sequence of tempering the clay, moulding, drying and burning bricks began.

Customers visiting Northiam in those days would have seen the dug and weathered clay being put through a pug mill in order to work it to a plastic state for hand moulding. More than this, they would have seen the mill itself powered not by petrol, electricity or running water, but by a horse which was hitched to a pole. This equine energy-provider, doubtless well-rewarded at appropriate breaks, was obliged to walk in a circle to turn the worm in the mill.



Top: Early days Bexhill, taken from the railway embankment. On the left is a wooden hut toilet, then the brick built boiler house and beyond that the office building, which had by then been enlarged twice. The lorry shown was one of the first owned by the company. The railway crane just seen was later to be bombed and hurled across two rail tracks and a roadway, to wreck the cement store shown on the right of the picture.

Bottom: Eastbourne beginnings, showing practically all the outside stock, the private rail siding and the cement and plaster store. These materials were received by rail at that time.

It was soon farewell to one horse power operation with the succession of a larger mill driven by a petrol engine, with this form of energy being ousted as electricity was brought to the village.

As with the Eastbourne land the brickfield at Northiam was leased, but a major difference was that the Northiam landlord received a royalty on all bricks produced! It was not just bricks to emanate from this depot however, for as soon as a timber building had been erected stocks of cement and plasters were brought in, thus paving the way (figuratively, if not yet with actual heavyside paving materials) for a future hive of activity.



Thus it was from this three unit base that M. P. Harris was ready for real business, with such trading still challenged by the continuing depression, but with the strength that comes from a good staff ready and willing to go after business and give the best possible service once achieved.

Such activities and determination were essential, indeed vital. Competition from other merchants trading in the early 30's was knife-edge keen, its sharpness honed by that depression, and builders were, necessarily, more price-conscious. Even so it was deemed nonsensical by the company to expect to build a profitable business on price alone.

Instead the policy for survival and prosperity was not only to maintain a close watch on prices but also to give special attention to quality and length of credit afforded to customers. Additionally those formative years saw superhuman effort, long hours, self denial, and tightly controlled overheads, maybe not so very different from today, but with the risk of failure at that time very much greater.

Trading increased of course, as predicted and planned, but there was still the £7,000 loan to reduce and repay in full within a matter of years. And there was the necessity to increase both depot space and staff. Money for all this was required to come from retained profit.

Nevertheless, as those early-day ledgers showed, M. P. Harris was making a profit albeit on the low side. Additional progressive activity saw the opening within three months of a gravel pit at Hellingly—with a budget of just £25 being allowed to make the pit operational. Gravel at Hellingly was covered by an overburden of 3ft. – 4ft, but as the field was adjacent to a public road it was not difficult to pipe a ditch and create an entrance. As with the Northiam brickfield the owner had agreed to be paid a royalty on output.

Initially the gravel from Hellingly was used principally by the county council for road mending. A course grade of granite or lime stone was used with the gravel, watered in, and then steam-rolled to consolidate and bind. When the surface had dried it was usually tar sprayed and sanded. This method of course, gave way to the use of tarmacadam finished with a topping. However a useful trade in path and drive gravel had been built up in the meantime and continued until the pit was worked out after some 25 years of life.



*Norfolk. An aerial picture of the whole of the brickfield. The two areas of bricks drying on open 'backs' provide
perspective. Two clumps of bricks can be seen. The merchant depot is to the right of the picture with steam and engine
officer building.*

Perhaps this was not mainstream builders merchanting, nevertheless, it was a useful and profitable sideline. So was the supplying in those early days of concrete hardcore to the East Sussex county council which was engaged in road widening. It is something of an irony that the roads for which we supplied materials were soon to be used daily and heavily by our own vehicles bringing heavyside materials to the inner and outer reaches of Sussex.



So what was the financial position at the end of that first pioneering year? The 'year', which was in effect only 10½ months, saw a net profit of £892 on a turnover of £35,019. Then with the first year over (and with B. K. Cheele's future secured with the Eastbourne branch continuing to profit) it was considered prudent by the directors to engage more staff and extend the premises. To this end, and encouraged by first year trading results, a book-keeper was engaged at Bexhill, while in April 1933 an office boy, W. J. Haffenden, started at Eastbourne. Soon a second telephone was installed, with young Haffenden becoming adept at dealing with two calls at a time.

The following year Bexhill also elected to engage an office boy, M. H. Love, now in our jubilee year a director. Additionally the office was enlarged by two rooms to accommodate two more staff—giving at that time a total floor area of 456ft² at a cost of just £90. For a similar sum central heating was installed.

With the help in those pioneering days of a £1,000 bank loan at 4½% the buildings and land of the old Hailsham Union were purchased by M. P. Harris & Co. for the purpose of dismantling and salvage of materials in the buildings. The original building, erected as a barracks for troops during the time of the Napoleonic wars, and subsequently used by the Hailsham Board of Guardians until they became redundant with the abolition of the Poor Laws, had been empty for some time. The buildings were of brick and tile, or slate, and contained large quantities of timber including oak. The careful dismantling over a period of 18 months yielded some 360,000 cleaned bricks for re-use, many of them red facings.

A ready market existed for these, as during this time, individually-built houses of old materials, especially bricks and oak timbers were being sought. The dismantling was carried out by the gravel digger from our pit close by, sometimes assisted by his wife and son. The only plant consisted of a ladder and chutes—made on site, and several brick tools for removing and cleaning. All materials were cleared and a satisfactory profit achieved.

The site today (at Hawks Road, Hailsham) now includes 12 semi-detached bungalows, and a number of council houses.

Meanwhile back at Eastbourne more land was rented from the timber merchant, enabling the building of a new store for cement and plaster. Additionally the office was enlarged to a total floor area of 338ft², and another office boy engaged, to follow in the footsteps of the first, who had



BUILDERS MERCHANTS

MANUFACTURERS OF SUSSEX STOCKS.

Head Office and Depot:

WEST STATION GOODS YARD, BEXHILL-on-SEA

Telephone: Bexhill 1600 (2 lines)

Branch Depots —

ST. LEONARDS WHARF, EASTBOURNE,

Telephone: Eastbourne 3800 (2 lines)

WHITBREAD LANE, NORTHIAM,

Telephone: Northiam 100

SPECIALITY:

HELLINGLY BINDING GRAVEL

for Carriage Drives and Garden Paths

"THE FINEST BINDING GRAVEL IN EAST SUSSEX"

GRAVEL PITS: MILL LANE, HELLINGLY.

Top: Inside Northiam branch as it is today.

Bottom: 'It pays to advertise' is an adage we have believed in since the beginning. This advertisement appeared in the Kent & Sussex Courier in 1935.

graduated to the position of clerk. And at Northiam the premises were graced occasionally by the presence of a fine, proud, albeit secondhand, Austin Seven purchased for the brickyard foreman to canvass builders in the area.

It was not just investment in smaller vehicles that was favoured by the directors however, but in large ones too—in the form of goods vehicles. Until 1936 these had been hired, meaning that M. P. Harris & Co. was not in a position of itself to give the level of service which customers had come to expect. So the answer was not to hire but to buy, which we did in the form of three long wheelbase Bedford two ton trucks, one for each depot, painted in the green and light stone colours which are still the livery today. The cost of each truck was £240. The driver of the Eastbourne lorry was W. J. Stephens, who went on to become depot manager.

All road transport rates were very competitive at that time. As an example, Flettons bricks were unloaded from the railway truck and delivered to and stacked on sites within one mile of the station for as little as 2s 6d (12½p) per 1,000.

In the same year, 1936, undeniably one of the main pioneering periods, Mrs. I. P. Harris and B. K. Cheele were appointed directors. At the same time it is recorded, 'to relieve pressure of work at head office, it was decided to engage an office boy.' For as in the case of Eastbourne, the original lad had quickly graduated to clerk.

In those early days a lot was learned about branch operation. One important part of it was documentation of sales from point of sale to customers' ledger account. Then the procedure was that on making a sale at a depot a delivery docket in triplicate was made out, one copy for signature, and return if delivery was involved, one copy for the customer and one copy left fast in the book. From the book, copy details were copied on to an invoice return, with one page per customer. Each item was price rated and cost of haulage shown if delivered. Top copies were sent to head office weekly to arrive early in the week following. There the items were calculated, extended, totalled and checked prior to the detailed customer's invoice being typed, checked and posted to ledger, before being despatched. Copy invoices were sent to depot and were there checked to ensure they were correct and nothing had been missed. The whole process was thorough although very laborious. But the system operated for some years and virtually no changes were made in any aspect of administration until the immediate post-war years.

So by now M. P. Harris & Co. had become firmly established. The loan from Mansfield Holdings had been repaid in full, the first traveller had been appointed at Eastbourne, and a 5-cwt Ford van painted in Harris livery colours was provided for his use. A modest selective contributory pension scheme was introduced. Also, yardmen and lorry drivers were for the very first time given an annual holiday of one week.



Early days Haywards Heath depot, opened in 1937, a time of gloom in Britain.

Also an opportunity arose in 1936 to purchase the freehold of 30 acres of beachland at Lydd in Kent. It was entirely beach with no overburden of any kind. Upon consideration, it was felt it would be many years before it would be economically viable to market the aggregate west of Lydd—there being ample supplies at Rye and Eastbourne. To the east was mostly country with a few villages before Folkestone was reached—and there were several pits serving the area. As it would lock up capital for a long time the offer was turned down. The price?—just £30 an acre!

Amid all the pointers to progress the first real step was taken in deciding to open a depot at Haywards Heath, when a plot of almost derelict railway land close to the station was rented. There was no difficulty in obtaining planning consent for the erection of timber-built stores and an office and the depot opened in 1937.

This was the year following the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, and the succession to the throne (and then abdication after 325 days) of King Edward VIII. The year also saw the formation of a coalition government, and it was a time of an uneasy international situation, when trade generally was beginning to decline. Nationally, at home in Britain, it was a time of gloom. Not since the depression had the situation looked so black. Against such a backdrop, M. P. Harris & Co. found it needed every ounce of that pioneering spirit to progress in the manner planned.

In 1937 too, the Cement Makers Federation, representing all the cement makers, issued a schedule of prices applicable to full loads of cement based on radii from works. Destination points were identified by place names, leaving little scope for mis-interpretation. Merchants who had or said they had adhered to these prices and had not made any allowances from invoices, or 'secretly', qualified for a deferred rebate on all tonnage for the year.

M. P. Harris & Co. had met prices in a very few cases to retain custom but had not offered to cut any prices; one could say it is a distinction without a basic difference. Faced with swearing an affidavit that the schedule prices of cement had been observed, M. P. Harris refused to do so and the rebate for the year was lost—but principles were upheld.

In 1938, the year of Munich, trade declined throughout the period. Results at the half way stage were poor and few were hopeful about the future. Overheads and bad debts were too high and regrettable though it was, two travellers were taken off the road and asked to seek work elsewhere. Other economics were made in an effort to keep overheads down.

But in spite of these darker days, M. P. Harris & Co. had come through to face the future, however bleak it looked at that time. Whatever the prevailing international and national situation, the company had demonstrated, in its beloved Sussex, a true pioneering spirit. These had been the pioneer years and would be remembered as such.

Chapter Two

The War Years: 1939-1945

Early in 1939 and with those war days not too distant, M. P. Harris & Co. had, after allowing for current commitments, some £1,000 in hand and the firm was desirous of keeping this all too slender reserve for emergencies.

With the probability of hostilities at anytime a war risks insurance was taken out on all the company's buildings, and younger staff were viewing with understandable concern and dismay the prospect of being called up, should war be declared. Even so, in spite of the prevailing gloom, it was decided to hold a staff outing. The first, it consisted of a trip to Brighton and a visit to the popular ice show at the sports stadium.

At this time, cinemagoers were all agog to see Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh romancing and rebuffing in 'Gone With The Wind.' That the theme was the American Civil War and was a possible reminder of the prospect of an even bloodier war seemed to matter not; escapism was the order of the day.

That war, as will be stamped indelibly on the minds of thousands of British people, was declared at 11 a.m. on September 3. The massive evacuation scheme was put underway, petrol rationing was quickly introduced.

Home at Eastbourne, the M. P. Harris & Co. staff consisted of the manager, clerk, office boy, yardman and delivery man. Within the short space of three months, the clerk had been called up for service which meant that with the exception of the delivery man, the branch was back almost to the same complement of staff which obtained when the firm began seven years earlier, but with the addition of the Haywards Heath branch to supervise.

This was nothing compared to what was happening elsewhere. The year 1939 saw the sinking of the Royal Oak in Scapa Flow and the Battle of the River Plate, but the common denominator was still survival.

The black year end saw, too, a direct effect of war on the UK building industry, with requirements to obscure lights in factories, a British Standard ARP specification for 'electric hand lamps' and the issuing by the Clay Products Technical Bureau of a leaflet for distribution by builders, referring to ARP brick domestic shelters.

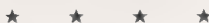
As always, manufacturers were not slow to make capital from the situation in their own effort to survive. For example upon learning that people were more prone to pneumonia, bronchitis and flu, because of standing, thinly clad, on

damp or wet earth floors in air raid shelters, one manufacturer was offering 6in x 6in thirds quarries which enabled a 6ft x 4ft shelter to be floored for 4s 0d (20p), plus carriage and packing! Well-fired quarries, claimed this maker, provided a hard, dry, warm floor.

For M. P. Harris & Co, meanwhile, there was very little trade from depot stocks, except for materials for the roof and other essential repairs needed after damage by isolated aircraft attacks. All stocks were down and at Eastbourne there was open storage to spare for the local brewery to stock hundreds of tons of coal in reserve. At Northiam a store was used by the Ministry of Works for a dispersal stock of roofing felts.

Naturally all economies possible were made. Two of the company's lorries from the fleet of four Bedford trucks were sold and the salaries of the two working directors reduced (although these were duly increased when the position was reviewed). Also, while some clerical staff elected to take off due time, there was a commendable general disposition to forego staff holidays.

Over in Haywards Heath a junior clerk was re-engaged to keep the depot open on his own until he was called up, when a retired army sergeant stepped in to replace him. However, the indifferent health of this military pensioner meant the depot was sometimes closed, a situation that could have been worse had not a neighbouring indeed, neighbourly, builder sometimes helped out by opening up and serving the trade (some of whom doubtless were his own competitors!)



Dark days too in 1940. This was the year of Dunkirk, the year our Channel Islands were first occupied by the Germans, the year when British architecture was dealt a cruel blow with the bombing of the Guildhall in London and no less than eight Wren churches.

Closer to home hit and run air raids on coastal towns were becoming more frequent, and as a precaution stocks of M. P. Harris & Co. stationery and records were moved from Bexhill to Haywards Heath.

It was literally 'enemy at the door' for M. P. Harris & Co, too, when on one frightening occasion Bexhill office staff were moved to the home of our founder due to the presence of unexploded bombs around the depot. Soon after they were again moved to the house following a bombing early one morning, when a railway crane was blasted from its position from the other side of the tracks to land on the cement store. Fortunately this was the only war damage suffered by the company.

But not so elsewhere. Damage was rife and thousands of homes were in dire need of repair, not least at roof level. Inevitably stocks of slates ran out and little satisfaction could be gained from telephone calls or letters to the Welsh quarries. Once again, frustration precipitated positive action at M. P. Harris & Co., when it was decided that B. K. Cheele should personally visit the various quarries in North Wales. Accompanied by his wife he set off by car

with a full tank of petrol, two five gallon oil drums filled with petrol in the boot, and all the available coupons from the meagre ration allowed for his vehicle.

With the total blackout and all road signs and place names removed, the journey could, understatedly, be described as a nightmare. However perseverance paid dividends, with a quarry managers receiving Brian Cheele in a friendly and helpful manner.

It was found that quarry stocks of the popular sizes which were on order were virtually nil, but the first quarry visited had a large stock of unsold 20in \times 9in sizes. Another could offer 20in \times 12in sizes. Reasoning that these could be used on roofs of 20in \times 10in slating, and taking the view that the rather conservative attitude of the building industry would soon need to yield to reality, B. K. Cheele placed on the spot orders which totalled 60,000 slates with the first truckloads arriving at Eastbourne before the end of that same month—November.

The supplies were continued on subsequent ordering and even enabled M. P. Harris & Co. to send slates to neighbouring towns, including Croydon, following roof damage by air raids.

But while seemingly achieving the impossible — bringing in slates when supplies were thought terminated—M. P. Harris & Co. could not prevent the progressive call-up for war service, which was depleting still further the already-reduced staff. B. K. Cheele was called to serve the Country, with the former Bexhill director J. H. Pescod, who, for health reasons, had retired early in the war, coming out of retirement to manage the Eastbourne depot in 1941.

That year saw Rommel open his attack on North Africa, Rudolph Hess parachuting, on a senseless mission into Scotland, the tragic sinking of the Ark Royal, and the devastating attack by the Japanese on Pearl Harbour.

Back in Britain observers on the building industry, while deprecating the war, saw that it at least opened up a vast potential market for new materials and constructional methods. 'Most of all' said one 'It has brought the demountable house and pre-fabricated building components from theory to practice.' Other products purpose designed for wartime included an ocular-door knocker which permitted the housewife to view the caller during black-outs, and 'indicator' tiles which showed up kerbs and similar black-out dangers.

The same year, 1941, also saw the emergence of plans for a large building on Clydeside, described as the 'Shelter of today, home of tomorrow', and which would function, progressively, as a shelter, a hostel and a house. The merchant industry was also kept busy supplying materials for secondary repairs, the making-good of blown-down ceilings, and rendering exposed party walls.

The difficult times for M. P. Harris & Co. continued, as they did for countless other companies intent on survival and who adopted, as did our

DISORDER CAUSED BY THE ENEMY



The headline is not ours. It appeared in the Bexhill-on-Sea Observer in November 1940, when our giant crane at Bexhill was 'blown about like a feather' by a bomb blast, to land on the cement store. Fortunately no one was hurt. The picture is courtesy of the newspaper, which, on our behalf, photographed the actual page of their Saturday November 9, 1940 issue.

firm, a Churchillian determination, the bulldog stance that is a characteristic of the British people when under duress and threat.

Soap rationing was introduced in 1942. The same year saw Malta being awarded the George Cross, Canterbury bombed, and Rommel's African army retreating. In the building industry, of 1,147 brickworks which were operating at December 1938, over 300 had now closed with the south-east being the hardest-hit. At that time M. P. Harris & Co's brickyard at Northiam had already ceased operations.

In 1943, as is chronicled in the history books, the war situation was becoming more favourable to Britain while for the British building industry it was still a time of change. For example, a leader in *Builders Merchants Journal* observed: 'The war has brought new methods of handling cement . . . and the five ton, chute-fitted tipper vehicle should prove a profitable proposition for larger merchants where continuous bulk deliveries are required.'

Also to be noted at that time were advertisements such as 'Roofing tiles for repairs to war-damaged houses and agricultural workers' cottages.' The same year, the year the Scharnhorst was sunk, the Ministry of Fuel and Power staged a fuel efficiency conference, not such a very different theme from the energy conservation programmes of today, but for very different reasons.

To the year 1944, with a certain Mr. F. J. Osborne of the Town and Country Planning Association declaring that the immediate shortage of houses acutely felt during the war would obsess people at the peace. Merchant advertisements of the day cried out for managers 'for the duration only'. Other executives actually sought to get into the industry with advertisements such as 'Sales manager, 30, exempt, ex-army, seeks a really progressive managerial position.'

Boulogne, not many nautical miles from M. P. Harris & Co., in Sussex, was entered by the Allies, and there existed an optimistic feeling that the beginning of the end was in sight, which of course it was, with our war with Germany ending officially at one minute past midnight on Tuesday, May 2, 1945. In our industry, other war-linked advertisements such as the following appeared (this, by a well-known roofing material manufacturer):

'We should like to thank the merchant trade for the many demonstrations of goodwill during the time supplies of roofing felt were slowed in consequence of the priority demand for airstrip materials for Normandy.'

Editorials observed with no hidden displeasure that 'the war with Germany is over, and the demobbed have started to return home, including a substantial quote of key building operatives.'

A feeling also at that time was that the war had made most householders much less fastidious about decorative finishes than they were in peace years.

Observed one trade personality 'Once they (householders) have compared the relative actual cost and quality of materials used with current professional charges they usually become more than ever desirous of doing every job they can themselves.'

The beginnings of today's diy boom! A pointer to the advent of dual trading? Perhaps

As for M. P. Harris & Co., in these difficult times the situation was relieved by the mutual goodwill of people, and the self help at depots in loading and unloading—all without complaining or seeking to take mean advantage.

There are many items on M. P. Harris & Co's records which indicate the problems which arose during the war years. But the company kept going, through the hard work of the founder and his small staff, and actually emerged at the end of the war financially sound.

The same year saw B. K. Cheele return from war service to be appointed general manager. A yardman was engaged at the previously near-inert Haywards Heath branch, a war bonus of one month's wages for each year of war service up to four years was paid to ex-service staff.

Mercifully, no member of staff lost his or her life through a direct act of war and each and everyone was strengthened by those war-weaved years, determined to see their company grow and prosper in the better years which lay ahead.

Chapter Three

The Growing Years: 1946-1962

The war with Germany was over but in 1946 the aftermath was all too evident. This was the year the United Nations was established, the year Goering committed suicide, the year when the United States of America, still reacting to the effects of a war which they had entered following the bombing of Pearl Harbour in 1941, carried out atom bomb tests at Bikini.

Back at home, the bread rationed British sought to escape, if only momentarily, from reality. A film of that year 'Great Expectations' was perhaps the most appropriately-titled celluloid offering from British studios. But unlike Pirrip—or Pip—in this Dickensian delight the public had much with which to contend in the form of post-war reparation that was both material and spiritual. Homes needed rebuilding or restoring. Many families could not be rebuilt but wherever possible efforts were made to regain something of family life that had existed in pre-war days.

Undoubtedly, the British building industry was quiet. Demand for materials, of which in any case there was a paucity, was low.

Not so the spirits of M. P. Harris & Co. War was over. The company was financially sound. These were to be the growing years—even though there were to be developments that had a direct bearing on the rate of progress which could be achieved. The Ministry of Works for example introduced a priority scheme for the supply of scarce specified building materials, with building work itself subject to licence, a restriction which was not to be removed for another six years.

The year saw Mr. P. R. Harris, son of the founder, appointed manager at Eastbourne with an appointment to the board to follow later that year. More broad based developments included the inauguration by M. P. Harris himself of the first of the managers' meetings which were to be held monthly.

At the inaugural meeting in 1946 our founder reiterated a company policy that is still worked to today: straight dealings . . . efficient service . . . the personal touch. The minutes of subsequent meetings referred to continuing shortages of all kinds—and they noted that those building licences were required for any job which exceeded £10. Unlicensed work, show the minutes, could be carried out up to the value of £10, while each such job could in addition incur a further £2 per month expenditure.

Investments in transport recommenced (remember two lorries had been sold as part of a successful bid to keep the company solvent in the war years) with the purchase of two five-ton Bedford lorries and the ordering of two more. Also that year brickmaking at Northiam re-started and the freehold of the brickfield purchased, ending the royalty arrangement with the original owner. These were brighter days too with the resuming of the M. P. Harris & Co. staff outing, this taking place on a Saturday afternoon.

Looking ahead at that time, which the company did and still does, it was felt that the existing Eastbourne premises would be unsuitable for the M. P. Harris & Co. of the future—with its plans to expand, extend delivery areas and provide an even better service for customers. In the event, other premises which had better potential even though they were war damaged, were purchased with a bank loan of some £7,000. Such a figure, it will be recalled, had wholly financed the start-up of M. P. Harris & Co. in 1932!

Our records show that the first plans for rebuilding were rejected by the local authority because steel, one of the many building materials scarce at that time, was to be incorporated into the structure. New plans in an acceptable form were passed but even so, it was to be nearly two long years before the war damage claim, planning and licensing clearance, permitted rebuilding work to begin.

The following year when there was an increase in the cost of local authority housing (house prices, London from £1,300 to £1,400 and elsewhere from £1,200 to £1,300), saw many changes which had a direct or indirect influence on the trading of M. P. Harris & Co.

For example, frustratingly, cement was in short supply, due not only to a scarcity of cement which was on strict allocation for a period but also, and mainly, to lack of paper sacks in which to put the commodity! Also the prices of most metal goods were government controlled, while building licences were becoming restricted, with efforts made by our company to obtain business with farmers and others who enjoyed licensing priority.

The year also saw the issue of the 'Blue List', a publication that was to dictate a widespread readership among merchants up and down the country. The book emanated from 'DBSJC' (Distributors of Building Supplies Joint Council), a body formed in wartime in co-operation with government to ensure the distribution of materials to areas where they were most needed.

But whatever the decrees of the day the direction which M. P. Harris & Co. was taking was undeniably forward. Two more Bedford lorries were ordered to cater for an anticipated and planned for increase in business. The Northiam depot moved to a larger site on company land. Certain members of staff enrolled for what was the first trade education scheme introduced by Building Industry Distributors (later to evolve into the Builders Merchants Federation). The scheme took the form of a postal course comprised of light and heavyside papers, and the company's participation marked the

beginning of a staff education policy and commitment that are among the strongest in the industry today.

Amid such activities a building licence was obtained for additions to Bexhill head office and depot offices.

But as well as having an eye on structural changes and improvements, the company in 1947 sought to improve and make more sophisticated the administration side of the now even busier business. For example a system of central buying was established. This simply involved collecting stock figures from the four depots—Bexhill, Eastbourne, Northiam and Haywards Heath—and making up an economic quantity for delivery to one selected depot, leaving the remaining three to collect their allocation. The scheme worked tolerably well but the principal fault lay in depots failing to collect their allocations in a reasonable time, to the understandable annoyance of the depot accepting the main consignment!

Much more successful however, was a stock recording system devised to replace an outmoded method of entry in a bound book. Such a method was now time-consuming, usually out of date, and rarely accurate. Most welcome then, was the introduction of a new perpetual inventory system of cards that was to become fully operational in the following year. The system was judged sufficiently flexible as to accept various later changes (such as warehouse operation, codifying, and increases in ranges of items) and it is still in use today.

In the meantime those outside activities now included an expansion in the company's roofing work. Most of this work in 1947 was carried out by labour gangs of two or more men, in more recent times known as 'the lump'. It is recorded that one gang priced $10\frac{1}{2}\text{in} \times 6\frac{1}{2}\text{in}$ tiling at 15s 0d (75p) 100 square feet, with other labours in proportion.

Into 1948, a year that was to see the nationalisation of the British railway system (a system with which M. P. Harris had literally close links at Bexhill), the assassination of much loved Indian leader Ghandi and the end of bread rationing. Towards the year end on November 3, the Princess Elizabeth, who had married Prince Philip in 1947, was to give birth to a boy—now a man who himself has demonstrated true British determination and who was to marry a certain lady destined to delight the nation with her grace and charm, and in this, our jubilee year, with a son.

A major, significant development in the industry that year was the publication of a Ministry of Works document *The Distribution of Building Materials and Components*, a report of a committee of enquiry appointed by the MoW and known as the Simon report.

Comprising some 140 pages, its purpose was to 'examine the organisation and methods of distribution of building materials and components, with particular reference to cost and efficiency, and to make recommendations'.

SMILING THROUGH HARD TIMES



The war was over, but these were still hard times for the Brush. Helping the staff of M. P. Harris & Co along was the annual staff outing, with the 1947 venue being Brighton. Some of the staff pictured are still working with us today

Among conclusions drawn by the committee were:

- The merchants provide ample storage space, and, so far as circumstances allow, carry good stocks.
- Their methods of stock control are in many cases rather primitive.
- Delivery services have been highly organised, with a strong tendency towards extravagance.
- Delivered price systems of the basing point type are wasteful of transport, inequitable as between consumers, and a deterrent to new production.
- The merchants' financial services are of great importance to manufacturers, and can support a large volume of speculative building.
- The trade information provided by merchants is generally adequate, and in the case of the largest merchants highly efficient. Comparatively few firms can provide highly technical advice.
- The merchants have very little influence on the formulation of British Standard Specifications, although they are generally co-operative.
- Restrictions on price competition have led to an over-elaboration of services, with a consequent increase in the cost of distribution.
- Insufficient attention has been paid to those methods of stock-control, layout, handling, etc., which would reduce operating costs.

The 1948 document was much discussed in merchant circles, not least by M. P. Harris & Co.

A copy of the report is still retained at head office.

For M. P. Harris & Co. 1948 was still a time of advance and innovation. The four branches were busy and contributing to an acceptable profit level. The trading territory was widening with the company's list of regular customers lengthening. Morale of staff was high, and even though there were still ramifications of those war years to put some constraint on progress, it was ever forward that the company was marching, keeping in step with those growing years.

This was the year the company exhibited at a County Agricultural Show (venue for 1948 was Hastings) an activity to be emulated in future years. It was the year also when a certain Vernon J. Fanstone was appointed new general secretary of BID. A Sussex man, born and educated in Brighton, he was soon to come into contact with executives from M. P. Harris & Co., with our firm tying in closely over the future years with BID and its otherwise-named successors.

The ensuing five years, 1949-1953, saw further progress on all fronts. General administration was brought right up to date. There were improvements, if somewhat limited, to offices and stores. A policy of further expansion was



Top. Further progress on all fronts, indeed—such as at Horsham, where a new depot was opened in 1950.

Bottom: . . . and at Chichester, pictured today, with a depot opening here in 1953.

adopted. All this of course was required to be within the company's ability to finance, with the additional assistance of limited bank borrowing.

In general administration some of the changes were quite radical. For example as the number of customers grew, the loose-leaf ledger (complete with spine lock to prevent unauthorised removal of ledger sheets!) gave way to the advent of mechanical accounting machines, when it was transferred to cards to be used in conjunction with the new machines.

Invoicing was another area of change, as the old system of accounting for sales from delivery of goods up to the completion of a typed invoice, was slow and expensive. This was replaced by more modern faster means.

The year 1949 saw merchants attending the BID conference in Torquay (a location often to be revisited) with events on the social calendar including Avril Angers and the Western Brothers in cabaret. Records show there was also a smoking concert.

This was the year too when clothes rationing ended and when the British gas industry was nationalised, joining the electricity industry and British Railways.

The following years, the start of another decade were, to understate, most welcome. The British people hopefully could rid themselves entirely of the manacles of the post war period and look forward at this beginning of the second half of the 20th century, to a better, brighter future.

Petrol rationing was to end—which was a good start in itself—and to the undoubted delight of the more fastidious, soap rationing was to end as well. There was misplaced admiration for the rascals who stole the 'Stone of Scone' from Westminster Abbey, some sadness at the news that George Bernard Shaw had died. But joy too upon learning that the Princess Elizabeth had given birth to a child that was to be her only daughter.

For M. P. Harris & Co., while still progressing, trade was not brisk. Materials were still in short supply or delivery erratic, with evidence of price-rigging being operated by certain manufacturers. Building licences were eased however and were now required for work in excess of £100 or £500 for designated buildings including farm and factory buildings.

But brisk trade or not M. P. Harris was ever expansion minded, demonstrating this by opening at Horsham a new depot, constructed on part of an old brick field purchased during the previous year. Some frustration was suffered in that three separate schemes were submitted before planning approval was obtained, but once built the depot went on to do well, indeed, doubling its size a few years later. The beginning of this new decade also saw M. P. Harris & Co. purchase a small haulage business in a move deemed as favourable to its four vehicles for which 'B' traffic licences were required.

Brighter times ahead maybe, but the ensuing year was to end in one of extreme sadness for the staff of M. P. Harris & Co. For the gentleman who had given the company its name, the visionary who in early days could see the



Still in the formative years, but showing all the signs of real development—our British branch. The old passenger, seen
 from the railway embankment, shows the then new depot office.

firm becoming well-established and prosperous, epitomising good service, died in December 1951 after a protracted illness borne with courage and tenacity.

The company minutes which record this sad event say: '... his conception of fair business principles was admired by all and did much to place the company in the high esteem which today it enjoys'.

Maurice Paul Harris, who died aged 66, was laid to rest in the village churchyard of St Mary-the-Virgin, Ninfield. In a funeral address, the Reverend Harry Bradburn described our founder as a man 'who was full of kindness and consideration for others.' Chief family mourners included his son Mr. Paul R. Harris, now deputy chairman, and who still remembers with much fondness the man who crusaded for and practised the principles of honesty, both at work and at home.

Early in 1951, and personally happier times for M. P. Harris & Co., saw the BID conference open at Scarborough. Here an observation was that the upward trend of prices in fletton bricks and facings was gradually reducing the static margin to an extremely low percentage equivalent. Strong representation would be made to the manufacturers in an effort to improve the position.

In non merchanting circles delight was expressed at the return to Westminster Abbey of the Coronation Stone, and even more pleasure demonstrated by those fortunate enough to visit the Skylon-dominated Festival of Britain, opened by King George VI from the steps of St. Paul's Cathedral.

The following year however was again touched by great sadness, but this time at a national and international level when King George VI died at Sandringham at the untimely age of 56. It was the year of the Olympic Games in Helsinki, the year that identity cards were abolished in this country, year of the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya.

Against this backdrop of events of magnitude M. P. Harris & Co. progressed and improved, establishing itself even more solidly as a builders merchant of note, endearing itself more to existing and new customers as its reputation for good service was nurtured and jealously guarded. Statistics for the first half of 1952 show that 21% more houses had been completed in Britain compared with January to June 1951, while the number of dwellings under construction rose by 18%. Interestingly these figures were given by a yet-unknighted Harold Macmillan, then Minister of Housing and Local Government.

In this year too B. K. Cheele was appointed chairman of M. P. Harris & Co., with P. R. Harris being appointed joint managing director.

If anyone was proud to be British at that time, surely never more was it felt by the nation than when Mount Everest was conquered in 1953 by Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing. This also was to be the year Winston Churchill was knighted, and when our nation and the world were treated to pageantry beyond equal when the Queen was crowned at Westminster Abbey.

But while undoubtedly marvelling at all these events the firm of M. P. Harris & Co. very much had its feet on the ground. Ever watchful of the needs of staff it set up for example a drivers' accident-free gratuity scheme in recognition of an increasing incidence of accidents which involved company lorries. Each driver's record was examined and gratuities paid quarterly. Also the staff pension scheme was converted to a non-contributory basis and all staff made eligible for two weeks paid annual holiday.

On the minus side, though in the interests of economy, it was decided to cease brick-making at Northiam (an act of closure repeated by many south-east brickworks), while more positive advances took the form of the acquisition of the freehold on the gravel pit and the opening of the Chichester depot.



The next three years—1954–56—were 'growing' years indeed. In 1954—the year Oxford won the 100th boat race—M. P. Harris & Co. took from the local authorities one acre of land on a 99 year lease at Haywards Heath with a view to creating a reserve stock of items which were usually on long delivery or in difficult supply. It was reasoned that depots would then be in a position to give quick deliveries from stock.

A further progressive move was to acquire the company's first mechanical loader and more ambitiously to broaden the firm's original concept by establishing a central stock. This planning during 1954 (and 1955) resulted in the opening of the first M. P. Harris & Co. warehouse in 1956, with the resultant satisfactory operation becoming the spur to establish more depots within easy servicing-range of the warehouse.

During the three year period the capital of the company was increased to £50,000, mains water was piped to Northiam (previously, water for brickmaking—but not for depot use!—was drawn from a pond), a significantly increased number of M. P. Harris & Co's employees were taking the now widely popular BID trade courses, the words 'builders merchants' in the company's logo were altered to 'building materials' to keep in line with current trends. The description, however, soon reverted to 'builders merchants' truly to identify the company's activities.

These years also saw a doubling in size of the Bexhill offices (during the extension, the general manager and secretary was each obliged to work from an 8ft x 6ft garden hut!), the acquisition, dictated by scarcity of transport in the Bexhill area, of hauliers F. Thomas & Sons of Sedlescombe, and the establishing of a permanent system of reporting specific overdue accounts to head office. Such advances in administration are of course important to many companies if they wish to remain in a profit situation. It is partly because of the continuous adaption of M. P. Harris & Co. to changing needs brought about by branch expansion that we have progressed so satisfactorily to this, our jubilee year.

Towards the end of this three year period, during which Roger Bannister became the first man to run the four minute mile (1954), the TV licence was



A result of our growing years. Top picture shows our Bexhill depot and head office as they are today.

*Bottom: Our showroom and storage building.
Similar pointers to growth can be found at all our branches.*

raised from £2 to £3 (1954), third class rail travel was abolished (1956), and the telephone weather forecast began (1956), BID price lists were being registered, as required by the new Restrictive Trade Practices Act, and delays were suffered in deliveries of fletton bricks. Not least, the Suez crisis in 1956 brought petrol rationing to Britain, this dictating that M. P. Harris fleet operate at 75% of normal running—a situation that fortunately was to be short-lived.

The year 1957 was blackened by the discovered dishonesty of the then company secretary, leading to dismissal (though to spare the wife and family further unhappiness, criminal proceedings were not taken), and brightened by events such as the opening of the Leatherhead depot.

Managers meetings continued, though from June of that year board meetings became infrequent. With the business growing by expansion and sales volume, decisions were taken by the directors and actioned without further report.

Away from M. P. Harris & Co's doors, Britain was full of wonderment and no little envy as Russia launched the first earth satellite, waited expectantly for 'ERNIE' to make the first premium bond draw, watched Her Majesty the Queen make her first TV Christmas broadcast. Less glamorously the Cheques Act 1957 came into operation, rendering unnecessary the issuing of receipts with 2d stamps.

Back at base the need had arisen for M. P. Harris & Co. to make its depots less reliant on the warehouse, and more efficient 'in-house' as the efficient operation of the warehouse depended upon a discipline at each location.

Another period of progress 1958 – 1961 was to follow with the company adhering to its policy of giving the best possible service enhanced by the personal touch.

That M. P. Harris & Co. staff at all levels were happy, and were friends as well as business colleagues, was in strong evidence at social occasions (such as the 1958 staff outing) and such bonhomie still abounds today. Doubtless the talk after hours was not always of business (wives will have seen to that !) but of Edmund Hillary and his New Zealand party reaching the South Pole, Dr. Vivian Fuchs doing the same, the disintegration of Sputnik One, the opening of the London Planetarium, and of Gatwick Airport—on Harris home territory. There was probably talk too of the M1 motorway, whose first section had opened in 1959, and of the wedding in the following year of Princess Margaret to Mr Anthony Armstrong Jones. Even more excited talk probably ensued in 1961 when Yuri Gagarin made his first flight in space and when John Kennedy, oblivious of the cruel fate to befall him, was elected 35th President of the United States of America.

For M. P. Harris & Co.—indeed for all merchants—1959 was a period when fixed price tendering for all local authority and government jobs was in force, with the object of avoiding cost increases during the term of a contract



Branching out

Top picture shows our Leatherhead branch as it is today, with a similarly modern illustration of our Paddock Wood branch shown under.

Bottom picture is a before-and-after of Worthing, showing the original site as it was in 1958, and (inset) the entrance to the branch of today.

(although whether it actually held prices down is doubtful!). But essentially it was a period of further real progress for the company. Two further depots opened that year. Paddock Wood, brining the company squarely into Kent trading territory with a location ideally suited to serve rural areas as well as towns, and in Worthing. The manufacturing agents company of Barflo Ltd. was acquired. Then in 1960, the year M. H. Love was appointed sales manager, a majority share holding was taken in RTC Transport (later RTC Supplies) of Herstmonceux, while the year 1961 saw the formation of Kingston Wharf Ltd., a company comprised of competing merchants, including M. P. Harris & Co., who sought to counter a near-monopoly situation in the aggregate trade. The same year the Guild of Architectural Ironmongers was formed, and in April 1961, BID and the BFPM amalgamated to become the National Federation of Builders & Plumbers Merchants.



Proof that these had, indeed, become the growing years could not be more conclusive than in 1962. For now the company had grown to a size enabling its going public. Accordingly M. P. Harris & Co. Ltd. was quoted on the stock exchange in July 1962.

A brief history of the public company, from the date of its quotation on the stock exchange to date, is given on page 50, but suffice to record at this point that on January 1, 1964, when the name of the public company was changed to M. P. Harris (Holdings) Ltd., a newly formed company took the original name to continue uninterrupted the trading as builders merchants—and to provide a further period of heritage and history which we now celebrate in our jubilee year.

Indisputably, these had been the growing years, with branches now established at Bexhill, Eastbourne, Northiam, (all 1932), Haywards Heath (1937), Horsham (1951), Chichester (1953), Leatherhead (1957), Worthing and Paddock Wood (1959), and now Faversham in 1962.

M. P. Harris & Co. had been established 30 years, and with three colourful decades to draw on to provide additional strength to succeed in the so-called 'Swinging Sixties', it was all set for a period of further expansion.



Top: Pride indeed, as we win the award for the best trade stand at the 1965 Sussex County Show, held at Hove. No less a personage than Harold Macmillan, Prime Minister of the day presented the prize.

Bottom: Faversham in jubilee year, 20 years on from its opening in 1962.

Chapter Four

The Expanding Years: 1963-1975

Thus it was in 1963 that M. P. Harris & Co. now 30 years established, set its sights on the near future, when further expansion was to be the order of the day, to cope with orders of the day of a different kind—from the ever-growing number of regular and occasional customers in an ever-widening territory.

This was to be the year of Dr. Beeching's report on the railways, which dictated certain closures of stations at home here in Sussex, the year of the great train robbery, the year the Dartford tunnel was opened. More notably, though tragically, it was the year President Kennedy was assassinated, with virtually all adults in Britain remembering today the shock to their system upon hearing the unbelievable news.

Back in this country and with those expanding years in mind M. P. Harris & Co. opened a Folkestone depot, bringing the firm strategically into the coastal area of east Kent, with a catchment area including Dover, now the busiest seaport in Britain. At that time the depot, nestling on an industrial estate just below a huge grassy mound known as Caesars Camp, was situated in a no-through road. But in this our jubilee year it became open-ended, permitting manufacturers' transport—and our own—to have easier access from the London end with deliveries made even faster by the completion of the Ashford to Folkestone M20 motorway.

The following year saw further expansion in the form of a second warehouse at Ashford with the Ashford depot itself later to be situated on adjacent premises. In those years Ashford was considered a London 'overspill' town, with a vast amount of building work resulting in an area now densely-populated by council house tenants on estates which fringe the busy town centre.

Down the coast from Bexhill, Brighton's council Capital Priorities Advisory Committee was concerned at the disproportionate amount of time spent on small housing schemes 'to the detriment of the completion of larger ones'.

Meanwhile the then National Federation of Builders and Plumbers Merchants was growing in stature and recognition, with B. K. Cheele contributing not only constructive comment but also his time. The year's programme for the federation included its first annual trade dinner (an event



*Top: Folkestone branch in the 1960's. Now, a through road makes for easier access.
Bottom: A works still in 1962. Then, as it is today, close contact with manufacturers was vital.*

no longer staged), when the gas industry's Sir Henry Jones addressed the gathering in the historical surroundings of London's Cafe Royal. Matters upon which the federation was to focus that year included plans by Government to abolish resale price maintenance, and a report from the Monopolies Commission which condemned price fixing arrangements by the Wallpaper Manufacturers Group.

A development which could have had some effect on the company's Folkestone branch was an Anglo-French agreement on a railway-fed Channel Tunnel (the entrance could have been literally on the doorstep of the depot), while other events of that year included the breaking of the land and water speed records by Donald Campbell, the opening of the new Forth Bridge, and the arrival of a third television channel in the form of BBC2.

The following year, 1965, saw construction orders in Britain take a tumble with private housing also being well down. The heavyside merchant trade was recipient of a new ordnance survey map which showed sand and gravel resources in the country as well as receiving a copy of the first set of national building regulations which replaced local building bye-laws. And with expansion still the policy of M. P. Harris & Co. the depot was opened at Ashford, joining the already established warehouse.

The nation was to be moved to some sadness that year by the death of Sir Winston Churchill, slowed down on the road by the introduction of the 70 mph speed limit, and denied the TV-promotion of cigarettes, through a ban on their advertising. More hardy merchants may have opted to walk the Pennine Way, which was opened in 1965, with the historians among us noting that this year was the 700th anniversary of Parliament.

The next three years, 1966 – 1968, saw for M. P. Harris & Co. a period of consolidation—in readiness for a further, even more active time of expansion. Administration methods were appraised to see if, and where, improvements could be made. Similarly, operations in the warehouse, yard and transport sectors were further improved and streamlined. Predominantly, however, was the ever-present need to give M. P. Harris & Co's customers the best possible service, a hackneyed adage maybe, but the customer still came first.

Providing something of a colourful backdrop nationally during these years was the winning of the World Cup in 1966, the meeting in Moscow of those ill-matched pandas Chi-Chi and An-An, and in 1967 the Torrey Canyon running aground off Lands End, the arrival in Plymouth of circumnavigating sailor Frances Chichester, farewell to the use of steam on British Rail's southern region, and a welcome to the QEII.

Darker days too, for in 1968 Martin Luther King and Senator Robert Kennedy were assassinated and Russian spaceman Yuri Gagarin killed (with tragic irony) in a plane crash.



Top: Ashford, 1982-style. The depot was opened in 1965, joining the already established warehouse.

Bottom: Hove today, 13 years on from its opening.

The beginning of the period 1966, had seen the imposition of Selective Employment Tax (SET) bringing a growing volume of protest from many sectors of the service industry, with the NFBPM presenting what it judged to be a sound case to the Chancellor on how it would affect the distribution of materials to the building industry.

In 1967, it was observed in the only merchant trade journal at that time that 'the Government was taking a lead in the process of establishing metric controlling dimensions in building . . .'. Even so, there were only a few cases at that time of metric equivalent being included in manufacturers' technical literature. This was also the year that nearly 2m dwellings in Britain were considered unfit—and a time when, for a period at least, there was optimism among private housebuilders.

Towards the end of 1968 M. P. Harris & Co. was well prepared to expand and develop even further, undoubtedly partly with the help of computerisation, which was now being considered by a quickly increasing number of merchants. (Some credit for this must go to B. K. Cheele. In July 1968 he became chairman of NFBPM's Organisation and Methods Committee which investigated the possibilities, and founding of the computer club quickly followed).

It was not until the next decade — the 1970's — that the company really further expanded in real terms. True in 1969 a decision was made for the Hove depot to commence trading as M. P. Harris & Co. in premises previously used by George Freeman Ltd. (which had been acquired by M. P. Harris (Holdings) Ltd, but there were still depots to be opened in 'the expanding years' at Hailsham and Tunbridge Wells with some further expansion coming about by acquisition.

The merchant industry during the period 1969 – 70 was rife with take-overs, bids, deals, and the *Financial Times* reporting almost daily on such developments. Sadly some merchant companies had their operations curtailed, lost their identity, perhaps in some cases even their spirit. This was not the case for M. P. Harris & Co., however, which had taken precautions to protect its trading name and building materials operation.

In the big world outside Bexhill and branches the French and British versions of Concorde had taken to the skies (1969). The same year saw most of us marvelling as Armstrong and Aldrin became the first men on the moon. Down on the ground in 1969 the old halfpenny was no longer legal tender, while on the water the QEII was making her maiden voyage.

The following year Britain was preparing to sort itself out numerately with decimalisation not far away and was in the grip of strikes as unions reacted to the 5% pay rise restraint. In 1971, the year of decimalisation, some 100,000 trade unionists marched in London, far from happy with the Industrial Relations Bill, and time for more blues that year (or rather goodbye to them) with the death of jazz trumpeter Louis Armstrong.

M. P. Harris & Co. moved on into its next year of trading, 1972, happy in the knowledge that it had now been established for 40 years and was just a decade away from jubilee year.

The warehouse at Haywards Heath had become inadequate due to the ever increasing demand on and wider range of stocks, so a new much larger warehouse and premises were constructed on the site of a disused brickworks at Henfield. It was to Henfield in July of that year that the warehouse operation was transferred from Haywards Heath. This was also to be the year that Customs & Excise began its largest-ever trader information and publicity campaign in preparation for Value Added Tax (to be introduced in April 1973). That the tax would dictate at M. P. Harris & Co. radical changes in invoicing, and cause extra work on behalf of accounts departments was a problem to be tackled with resourcefulness and good humour, and with the inevitable help of computers.

That year, 1972, Maurice Chevalier died, unemployed in Britain reached 1m, the Tutankhamun exhibition was staged in London, and the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh celebrated their silver wedding anniversary.

It was in the following year that the company finally obtained premises to construct a depot at Tunbridge Wells which was also opened that year while, on that expansion trail, the Hailsham depot commenced trading. The same year saw the acquisition of Brighton Asbestos Co. Ltd., specialist stockists of asbestos materials. A new company, Building Equipment Services Ltd., was established at Hailsham as suppliers of small equipment and tools used in the construction industry. A builders merchant Chandler-Tomsett Ltd, of Seaford was acquired and was soon moved to new and larger premises.

The talk among merchants was how Britain's joining the European Economic Community in January was likely to affect trading. Meanwhile VAT had descended upon us. Talk among wives, no doubt, was of the Royal Wedding of the year when Princess Anne married Mark Phillips.

★ ★ ★ ★

With just eight years to go before M. P. Harris & Co's jubilee year, 1974 chimed in, later to bring with it the abolition of the Pay Board and the end of the statutory incomes policy.

With Harlow, Essex, far from the favourite choice of all merchants as the location for the proposed new merchants training centre, the merchant trade journal of the day commendably took a trip to the town to check out travelling time and facilities, delivering in the event a report which, while purporting to be unbiased showed Harlow in a favourable light.

It was the charity registered merchant training centre in which B. K. Cheele, through the Institute of Builders Merchants and the Federation, has played a leading part, from conception to construction, to its eventual opening by the Duke of Gloucester, and into the late 1970's and now early 80's. The building and what it symbolises are seen by M. P. Harris & Co. as important to the improving standards of the builders merchant industry. As a seat of learning

Harlow itself has become a part of merchant history and heritage, while education here at M. P. Harris & Co. is rated, as it always had been, a high priority with every member of staff encouraged to attain membership of the Institute of Builders Merchants.

To 1975 with an historic event in M. P. Harris & Co's history, but one which did not entail any change in policy, management nor direction of our company, or any other company in the group. M. P. Harris (Holdings) Ltd., was acquired by Grovewood Securities Ltd., to whom part of the family shareholding had been sold in 1972. Grovewood itself has since become wholly-owned by Eagle Star Holdings plc, one of the leading insurance companies in the UK.

Suffice to say with no changes in direction being dictated that during the corporate changes, M. P. Harris & Co. followed its established course of growth and consolidation and today has in the background the additional financial strength and security of Eagle Star.

During the same year, 1975, merchants generally were calling for a more positive effort to be made by the federation to help bring about the abolition of the 'price code in its present form', with the NFBPM conference that year being held overseas for the very first time—in Amsterdam. B. K. Cheele was among those who formed the newly streamlined executive committee.

Meanwhile a massive 'home improvement' project was ditched with the Queen abandoning plans to spend £200,000 on modernising Sandringham, P. G. Wodehouse was no more to ponder upon, nor pen about, Jeeves, unemployment in the UK was 802,630.

And 'yes', for M. P. Harris & Co. these had been the expanding years. There were more branches, more space, more customers, more profit. Such a base was needed in order to face considerable challenges which lay ahead . . .



Warehouse and yards at Henfield, constructed and laid out in 1972, and replacing the Haywards Heath premises.



Top. Coming yet again to Kent with the opening in 1973 of the Tunbridge Wells branch.

Bottom: Hailsham, East Sussex in jubilee year.

Chapter Five

The Challenging Years: 1976-1982

The good news at the beginning of the period 1976 – 1980 was that a new depot at Maidstone had been established in 1976. The less bright news was that M. P. Harris & Co., along with other merchants, indeed with trade and industry generally was now entering a period which could be compared to conditions in the 1930's. These were not to be growing years, nor expanding years. The effect on trade as high interest rates and inflation, and uncertainty for the future, had a deterring effect on further expansion, meaning these were to be the years of challenge.

In 1976 the grim forecast of Building Materials Producers (BMP) was 'No upturn for two years.' The federation (via the NFBPM young merchants essay competition), spotlighted a DIY threat to the trade of the established stockists, while countless articles in the trade press warned merchants of the quick growth of DIY superstores—a sector of trade which was commanding a good cash flow as the UK home improvement market began to boom.

In that big world outside, the USA launched two unmanned spacecraft to land on Mars, two million miles away. Back on earth, Chinese prime minister Chairman Mao-Tse Tung died.

The same year saw the NFBPM in conference at Eastbourne, when the conference committee included John Cheele, our managing director.

The next year 1977 the UK building industry was still in a state of depression with only home improvement making any really significant advance. Such a state of affairs caused M. P. Harris & Co. metaphorically to dig its heels in even more, facing the challenge with strength drawn from 45 years' trading and content in the knowledge that it was still providing the best possible service and remaining, if not always busy, then ever efficient.

Such efficiency was clearly in the mind of the then NFBPM president when, at the federation conference in Spain that year, he said 'Brian Cheele's company is one of the most efficient builders merchants in the industry.'

This was the year that Jimmy Carter was installed as 39th President of the United States of America, when on home ground Sussex, Freddy Laker inaugurated the cheapest ever flight from Gatwick to New York, and when unemployment had reached 1.5m.



Top: Our branch at Maidstone, opened in 1976.



Right: Haywards Heath in modern times — compare this with the picture of pioneer years.



Bottom: Compare again. Picture shows part of our modern look Eastbourne branch.

BRANCH AND WAREHOUSE MANAGERS 1982



Surrey/ Sussex depot managers in jubilee year. Seated (left to right): J. R. Davies (Hayling Island); R. G. Norton (Latherhead); I. A. Kates (Harsham), and D. S. Holden (Chichester). Standing: C. P. Hughes (Hailsham); P. M. Veal (Haywards Heath); L. S. Marcham (Bexhill); G. E. Barnard (Eastbourne); M. J. Dancy (Herfield); M. F. Beal (Worthing) and D. V. Rhodes (Hove).



Kent managers in jubilee year. Seated: M. J. Strapple (Folkestone); T. C. Parker (Puddock Wood); T. Maddaford (Maidstone). Standing: S. A. Martin (Othlingham); W. J. H. Wells (Ashford); A. P. Woodham (Tonbridge Wells); R. T. Huck (Faversham); I. Carmichael (Northiam); A. B. Simmons (Ashford warehouse).

In 1978 another depressing comment came from BMP, who predicted 'The worst year for the industry since 1963 . . . cuts in public expenditure have hit construction harder than other sectors.' Then in June of that year, and exemplifying the see-saw statistics which punctuate our industry, they forecast a sweet but short recovery in the industry. In 1978 also, the NFBPM became the Builders Merchants Federation.

With just three years to elapse before jubilee year, M. P. Harris & Co. could still not see too clearly that 'light at the end of the tunnel', to which the optimists, perhaps rather than the realists, in the industry referred.

Even so in 1979 it was evident that progress was being made in the industry, with a statistical information source reporting 'The builders merchants trade showed profit and sales growing steadily . . . although merchants had a difficult year.'



The beginning of another decade—with 1980 scarcely bringing in a great degree of optimism as inflation rose to 20%. Nevertheless, a prediction of the day was that there were brighter times ahead for the construction industry, with long term increases in total output and productivity while a national highlight was the wedding in 1981 of Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer.

Meanwhile, the feeling of M. P. Harris & Co. was that the country must move out of recession at some time and rising even more to the challenge we acquired in 1981 a site for the construction of a new depot at Gillingham, with plans to open in jubilee year. Such an investment was considered well founded in that the densely populated Medway towns — Rochester, Gillingham, Chatham — would offer good business when the recession was over. Additionally in 1981 with building industry observers seeing 'glimmers of hope', a site on Hayling Island was purchased for the purpose of establishing a merchant business in that area.

And so into jubilee year itself—1982—50 years after Maurice Paul Harris founded M. P. Harris & Co.—50 years which have seen the pioneers, war-time trading, years of growth, expansion, challenge. From those early-day beginnings have developed no less than 18 sales depots including, now, Hayling Island and Gillingham, all carrying extensive stocks and supported by the warehouses and a total staff, including directors and management, of 368.

What title can be given to the years ahead? 'Still Challenging'? Yes, without doubt. 'Still growing and Expanding'. That is our policy in our jubilee year.

But this book has been about the past and present. It has been about a history and a heritage. Especially, it has also been about people—for little of the progress recorded could have been achieved had it not been for the people who work for M. P. Harris & Co., and who have given of themselves so completely in serving the company and our customers.



Ultra-modern Gillingham branch, opened in jubilee year, with its facade more than hinting at a future well into our second 50 years and beyond.

THE SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM, 1982



Left to right: A. S. Bancroft, commercial manager; D. W. Elliott, sales administration manager; J. P. Cheele, managing director; M. H. Love, director; M. G. Haddock, field sales manager.

OFFICERS OF THE COMPANY IN JUBILEE YEAR

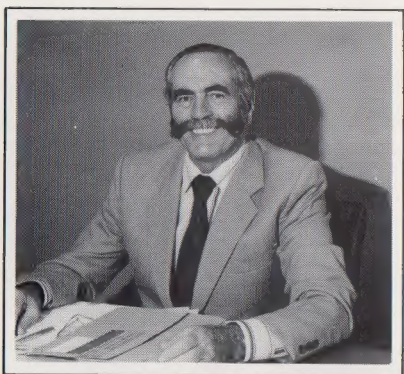
*B. K. Cheele,
MBE, chairman,
who has been
with the
company
through
its 50 years.*



P. R. Harris, OBE, deputy chairman



J. P. Cheele, managing director



M. H. Love, director



A. V. Fowler, company secretary

M. P. HARRIS (HOLDINGS) LTD.

From the date of its quotation on the Stock Exchange

From July 1, 1962 to January 1, 1964 the public company was M. P. Harris & Co. Ltd. On the latter date the name was changed to M. P. Harris (Holdings) Ltd., with a newly formed company taking the original name to continue trading as builders merchants. The group company now comprises four separate merchant trading firms including M. P. Harris & Co. Ltd.

The first new business to be started, Plant & Tools (South Eastern) Ltd., plant hire and scaffolding contractors, commenced in 1964 at Tunbridge Wells and subsequently opened three more branches. The first builders merchants to join the group was Chas. Crew & Co. Ltd., an old established and highly respected Hastings builders merchant. In the following year, another long established and well regarded Hastings builders merchant, Gilbert Davis Ltd., came in. These two firms seeing the advantages of merging soon set up a joint company known as Crew-Davis Ltd. This company is now trading from two sites in new and larger premises in Hastings and St. Leonards.

In 1966, Castle Concrete Ltd., a builders merchant in east Kent with three branches was acquired. Since this merchant no longer had any concrete manufacturing interests its title was changed to Castle-Harris Ltd. The firm now has a fourth branch at Canterbury.

In the same year two small hauliers businesses were purchased and in due course the transport subsidiaries were reorganised. The transport is operated by Thomas Transport Ltd. To adequately service the large number of lorries operating within the group a servicing company, Pump House Garage Ltd., moved to new extensive workshops at Northiam.

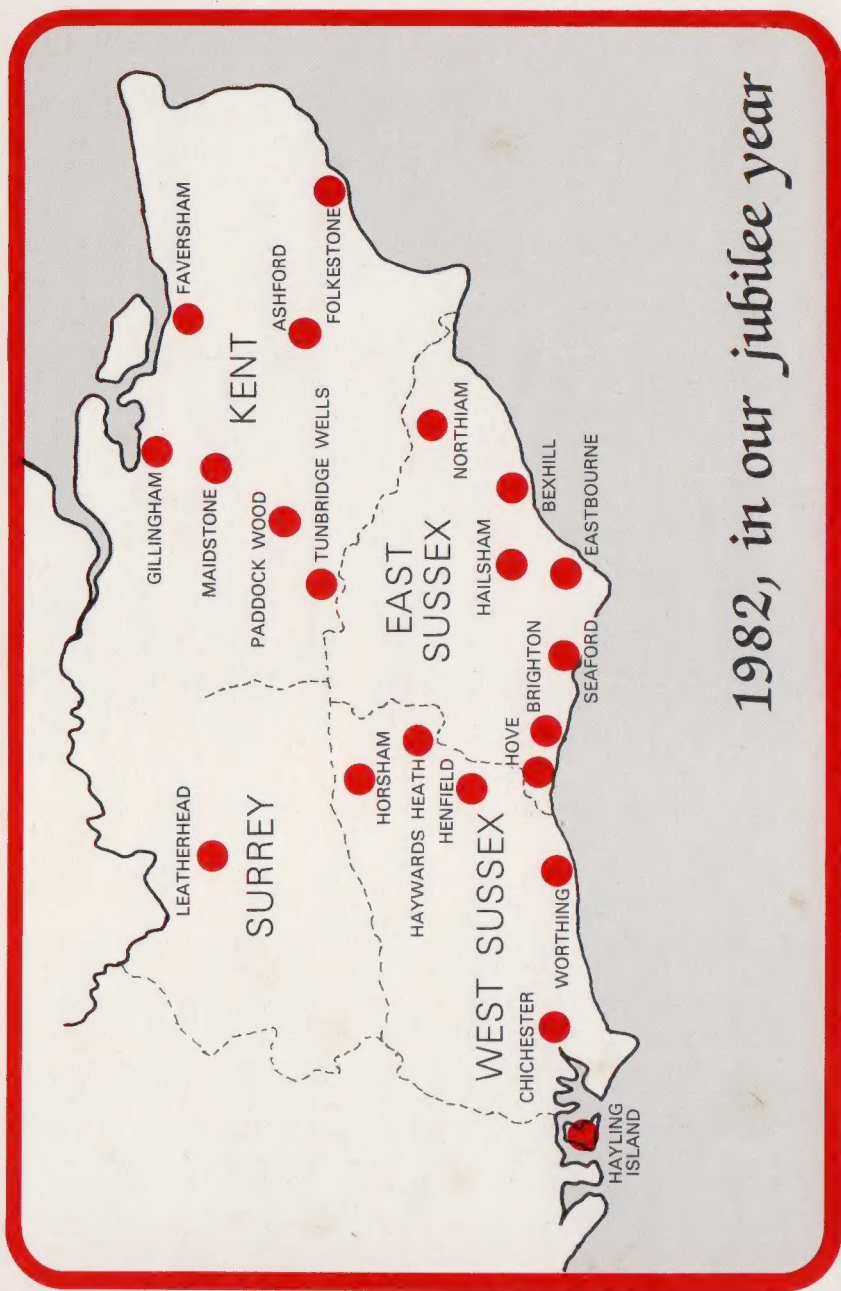
George Freeman Ltd., builders merchants, was acquired in 1969. The Brighton premises were closed down and the Hove branch converted to a depot of M. P. Harris & Co. Ltd.

In 1974 industrial land was purchased at Herstmonceux, providing much-needed space for storage of building materials. At the same time, a small pre-cast concrete business operating on the same property was acquired and trades now as Benton Concrete Ltd.

The use of the fork lift trucks at the warehouses and at the merchant depots was expanding, creating the need for a maintenance unit for these machines. Harris Fork Truck Service Ltd., was set up with facilities at Herstmonceux for sales and service.

In 1975, Grovewood Securities Ltd., who already held a substantial shareholding in this company, made an agreed offer for all the shares they did not already own. M. P. Harris (Holdings) Ltd., thus became a private company and a fully owned subsidiary of Grovewood Securities.

Since then Grovewood has become a fully owned subsidiary of Eagle Star Holdings plc and the latter is therefore now the ultimate parent company of the Harris Group.



1982, in our jubilee year

M. P. Harris & Co. Ltd. 1932-1982.